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White House clique is contras' best friend

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WASHINGTON—For three years, a clique of key White House aides has played a special role in the war being waged by Nicaraguan rebels against the Sandinista government, providing tactical military advice, fundraising tips and public relations assistance.

They also managed a sophisticated lobbying effort to get Congress and the American people to back Central Intelligence Agency support for the revolt.

One Marine Corps lieutenant colonel has made frequent trips to the region, been a liaison with the leaders of the contra rebels and, after direct CIA support was halted last year, gave the fighters tactical advice and military intelligence, according to well-placed military and intelligence sources.

Late last week, Rep. George E. Brown Jr. [D., Calif.], a member of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, charged that the colonel's activities might be an attempt to subvert the intent of Congress that "all direct involvement with the contras was to be cut off."

Asked by reporters about the situation at a bill-signing ceremony, President Reagan shot back, "We are not violating any laws."

The case is a vivid example of how a president can use the vast White House-National Security Council apparatus to press his policy intentions despite opposition in Congress and often without the knowledge or approval of the public.

It is also one more instance of a president using his staff to delve directly into a military and intelligence operation, a practice some of his predecessors attempted with little success.

In the fall of 1983, when U.S. involvement in Nicaragua's civil war was at its height, a clique of contra supporters gathered on the National Security Council staff. One was Constantine Menges, a CIA official who became special assistant to the President for Latin American affairs. Another was Jacqueline Tillman, a key assistant to then-UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick.

Some of the members of this circle, which included the marine colonel, also were members of a special National Security Council committee that coordinated and directed support for the war by the CIA, the State Department and the Department of Defense.

But unlike many other domestic and foreign programs, support for the contras was not transmitted solely through government agencies. Members of the White House staff gave friendly newsmen private tidbits about the tactics and plans of the rebel forces and detailed reports after rebel engagements.

They arranged for interviews with leaders of the main contra group, the Nicaraguan Democratic Forces [FDN], when they came to the U.S. and were key elements in a network of private public relations firms and publicity contacts that pushed the contra story in the U.S.

Last year, White House aides facilitated the trip to the U.S. of a girl who had been wounded by the Sandinista forces and helped arrange for her to be interviewed by the news media.

After Congress cut off CIA aid to the contras in 1984, the White House activity intensified. White House aides instructed Adolfo Calero and other leaders of the FDN where to get donations from private conservative groups in the U.S. and were also involved in private appeals.

In May, 1984, when it was clear that Congress was not going to give the CIA the money to continue its covert operation, the CIA official who directed the war in Nicaragua arrived in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, for a secret meeting with contra commanders. He had in tow the marine colonel who was introduced as the man who would be liaison with the "freedom fighters" [as Reagan refers to them] when the CIA officials pulled out.

Though the colonel's identity is known to The Tribune and several other news agencies, it was agreed that printing it could endanger his life.

Edgar Chamorro, a former FDN official, remembered that the Americans seemed intent on persuading the contras that, even if Congress was pulling back, they had the support of the President.

"They told how they personally briefed the President, and Reagan took personal interest in the details of many actions and carefully followed the maps. He had a great appetite for the maps. He loved maps," Chamorro said.

In the next 15 months, American intelligence sources confirmed, the colonel made numerous trips to Central America and has met contra leaders in Washington. He is personally committed to their cause and is a strong advocate of covert operations and U.S. military and intelligence support for the rebels.

The sources said his most important contribution to the movement was not tactical advice, but intelligence from the vast American collection apparatus, the link with the President and his ability to keep the leadership informed on American military activities in the area.

President Reagan is not the first chief executive who has used his staff to become involved in operations when faced with a recalcitrant Congress or a sluggish bureaucracy. Richard Nixon, who was dissatisfied with the efforts of the FBI to stop news leaks, formed